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### The Front

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## allyson stack

Allyson Stack's work has appeared in numerous journals in the United States and Britain, including *Edinburgh Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Ecloga*, and *Theory, Culture, and Society*. Her fiction has also been featured on National Public Radio and on Britain's *fourtythree* AudioMagazine. Her first novel, *Star Mansion*, is a work of historical fiction set in the American southwest and in France. She is currently Lecturer of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh.

### The Front

#### France, 1918

A blade of light slices through the room and a voice calls out my name. ShriII, piercing. I do not move. Wind rattles the stove-pipe, ceases, then resumes. Rain spattering the glass like handfuls of sand. The woman says my name again. *Vera, dépêche-toi!*

I throw off the blankets, shiver, and sit up. Bedsprings give a rusty groan as I grope about in the dark. Apron, stockings, rubber boots. Be ready for anything. Surprised at nothing. Still, a knock at the door is odd. They usually ring the old servant bells to signal a night-convoy. I fumble with collar, clasps, cuffs, and starched bits that never fail to frustrate me. Uniform by committee. The same one that keeps ignoring my pleas to improve our hot water supply.

Hurrying down the dim corridor of the old château, I hear the uneven rumble of the guns. But it is distant. Chandeliers that tinkle daintily when shells explode nearby are still. No mad rush of orderlies, nurses, doctors. No sterilizing pans on the boil, fogging up the rooms. No *brancardiers* heaving stretchers onto the floor of the *salle*. All is quiet. Busy, but quiet. I have been awakened, no doubt, to perform some menial task. Unclog a drain. Boil water because there is not adequate power to run the sterilizers. I vow to send another letter, begging for an additional fifty francs. We cannot keep relying on this faulty back-up generator every time a shell damages our underground wiring.

The *Directrice* intercepts me in the high-ceilinged hall. Tall with arrow-straight posture and a basset hound sag to her cheeks, she is a woman for whom no crisis is grave enough to justify appearing *mal coiffée*. Auburn hair swept back in a graceful chignon, she grasps my arm and leads me towards the back-stair. I am to assist one of the surgeons she tells me.

"Qui?"

"La Doctoresse MacNeil."

I know that one. Better than the others, anyway. Young. English. Studied medicine in the States. Upon learning I was American she sought me out in the mess-hall and regaled me with tales about her time in Philadelphia. A city I have never laid eyes on.

"Elle vous attends là." The *Directrice* waves towards a door that leads below stairs to a disused kitchen. Which confuses me. Surgical *équipes* scrub in the old ladies cloakroom by the ballroom-turned-operating theatre. I stammer something about a mistake.

The *Directrice* draws a deep breath, bosom rising formidably beneath her grey uniform, then heaves an impatient sigh. The same one she reserves for brass-buttoned inspectors who linger in the wards, making endless jottings in their penny notebooks. Which irks me: to be treated

like a pesky bureaucrat after being given instructions that make no sense.

I am about to press for an explanation when she tightens her grip on my arm. Giving me to know she will brook no discussion. No questions, no protests. Not a word in front of Armand, who is hurrying by with a stack of towels. Lips pressed tight the *Directrice* projects an air of haughty annoyance, as if the entire war were nothing but a great personal inconvenience. But I catch something in the dart of her eyes, sense it in this urgent finger-clamp. Not panic, no. She never panics. Not when the electricity gives out during a push, not even when we run out of antiseptic salve during a gas attack. But it is akin to panic. A rabbit's scrabbling. Nerve fluster of a woman with something to hide.

Armand disappears into the light medical ward and she releases my arm. Air of dispassionate efficiency wholly restored, she gives a brusque nod towards the door, as if to say this was her appointed task and she has fulfilled it. She has delivered me to the backstair in the middle of the night and must now return to her duties, which are considerable. With the squeak of a gum-soled shoe, she turns and walks away.

I stand fixed to the spot. Tosh MacNeil is behind this. That young woman has always made me uneasy, though not for the reasons she discomfits others. I do not mind her fags, nor the workingman's smock she wears when cycling to the village. Her egalitarian political beliefs do not strike me as radical or dangerous or even wrong. What disturbs me is the ferocity of her passions. And her presumption that the rest of us share them. Could we equip the ward with a gramophone to lift patients' spirits? Do any of our sponsors wish to donate a piano for the staff's *chambre de repos*? Would the committee fund a bacteriological lab to help treat cases of gas gangrene? Whenever we dine together I depart with a long list of tasks. And she insists, against all military protocol, that everyone call her Tosh.

I shuffle from one worn flagstone to the next, protest taking shape as I descend. *Done no real nursing since my training ended. Just an extra pair of hands during ward rushes. Snip bandages, give morphine, read tickets, record vitals. Beyond that I'm useless. My duties here are entirely clerical. Always have been.* Skirting crates of cotton and lint, empty packing cases, sacks of coal for which we paid dearly during the last *crise de charbon*, I cross the cellar. A spirit lamp hisses in the far corner, casting eerie shadows on the ceiling. And there, on a table where servants used to eat their meals, lies a young girl. Flat on her back, legs splayed, sharp white knees jutting up in the air. Tosh is bent between them, gloved hands slick with blood. At the sound of my footfall, the girl turns her head. Face thin and pale. Mole by her left eye big as a man's thumbprint.

Tosh waves at a basin of soapy water.

I stand rooted to the spot, staring. It is the Belgian girl who works at the *estaminet*, serving drinks in exchange for room-and-board. The owner does not do this from the goodness of her heart, but because a refugee charity back pays *Madame* a subsidy. Blood drips from the table, pooling in a hollow on the stone floor and I am seized by the urge to flee. To stumble back through the damp unlit room up the stair and into bed.

"Scrub," Tosh snaps. "TPRs."

My body obeys, hands plunging themselves into hot soapy water. Tosh's stethoscope lies on an upturned packing case. I dry my hands and grasp it. Draw a watch from my apron pocket. Sterilise the thermometer. Set the bottle of mentholated spirit back down. Every act receives my full attention. As if I can inflate each passing moment, make *now* so big that it smothers over the rest. Snuff out every spark before it flares.

I approach. Pair of muddy sabots and wool stockings heaped beneath the table. Dark hair hanging off the edge in limp greasy strands. Last summer she would come to the hospital and sell flowers. Half a sou. Lavender, lilacs, phlox, red hawthorn, whatever bloomed along the byeroads. I always bought a bunch, to the great consternation of the charge-sister who made no secret what she thought of this grubby refugee hanging about the wards.

I take up the girl's wrist and find her pulse, while Tosh picks through the pile of bar towels. She holds each soggy red cloth up to the smoky lamp, face pinched with concentration as I stare hard at the dial, watching the needle leap and sag, and into this moment of idleness all the old visions come creeping back. The bony limb. Rubbery and slick with blood. Wrapped in rags, handed to me in a bundle. Swaddled oily mess that I must carry to the back lot and burn to ash as dawn explodes across a desert sky. Yes, it is all here. Right now. Like some ghostly fugitive from another world, brushing up against me in the shadowy dark. I unwrap the pressure-cuff. Tell Tosh her vitals.

"Fetch morphine. Tell Félix to prepare a bed. Abdominal surgery."

I stumble over a box of candle-ends in my haste to get away. Upstairs, nurses and orderlies shoot me inquisitive looks as the *Directrice* sweeps through the wards, keeping gossip at bay by the sheer force of her presence. But it is a slow night and rumors fly: the girl entertains officers then reports back to the enemy... non, she was raped by the Germans, *ces sales Boches*... non, pas de tout she is a whore, Madame DuCrot runs a *bordel militaire*, *tu te souviens* we examined *cette fille* during the last health inspection ... Tsht, there is no baby, she was poisoned for selling military secrets. They are a shifty lot, these Belgians. Remember those refugees they arrested near Soissons?

My own speculations run a far different course. Some young officer seated at a table by the window. It is late. *Madame* has gone to bed.

Clearing away empty glasses, the girl's fingers brush up against his. A delicious half-accident. The officer lingers, ordering another brandy and one for yourself, *ma petite*. It is the first kindness from anyone in months. Candle burning low, they talk, laugh a bit. The brass buttons of his uniform are shiny, his beard freshly trimmed. The following night he returns. Waits for her to wipe down the bar and bolt the door. Some nights she would lie beneath him, right there, on the hard stone floor—its musty smell of ash and mold and muddy boots full in her nostrils—skirts hiked above her waist and in such moments, he was at her mercy. This was her undoing. The discovery that she had this power. The ability to shake a man to his very core.

I wait for the charge-sister to unlock the drug-cabinet. Handing me the ampoule, she whispers the cost and gives a disapproving cluck. Her figure is wrong. The price of morphine rose weeks ago. But why correct her? It will not earn the girl any friends. I place it on my dressings tray. Arrange everything just so. Syringe, needle, swabs, glass measure, kidney basin. I can delay no longer.

Downstairs, Tosh has lit a cigarette. Pulled off her gloves and tossed them in a kidney basin. While I prepare the *pique*, she smokes and talks. The girl walked uphill from the village, bar towels stuffed in her drawers. She snuck inside, hid behind the cellar-door, and waited. When Tosh passed by, the girl grabbed her.

"Mighty queer." Tosh shakes her head. "When I tried to get her into surgery, she bit me." Tosh extends her arm, but in the dim light I can see nothing. We will drug the girl, then strap her arms and legs to a gurney. It's what we do when a soldier resists.

"Is there some old wives tale I ought to know of?" Tosh exhales a long stream of smoke. The paper of her cigarette is stained pink.

"What do you mean?"

"One never knows what strange folk belief might hold sway. Perhaps the French think it bad luck to go under the knife on a full moon."

"She's Belgian."

But Tosh just keeps talking, relieved to have company. "Never done much of this business, you know. I had obstetrics in school, but that was years ago. For heaven's sake don't breathe a word to the chaps in the ward. It's hard enough without them carrying on about a woman doctor who doesn't know how to birth babies. Not that we're going to get a baby out of this."

"We?"

"You're to assist me."

I shake my head.

"Procedure ought to be no bother, compared to what we're accustomed to."

"I'm not accustomed to anything." I watch the dark liquid empty into the syringe. "Aside from paper-cuts and leaky pens."

Tosh scoffs. "Standard abdominal surgery. No shrapnel. No gangrene. Stitch it up if she's lucky. Remove the whole package, if not."

There are times when Tosh sounds vaguely American. Not her accent, which is English to the core, but the way she gives orders, offers diagnoses. It's different from the other surgeons. More direct, pithy, a bit too fast. She spent eight years in the States and her speech betrays her sometimes.

"Still, one of the more experienced nurses should assist you."

"You've no choice, I'm afraid." Tosh flicks her fag-end to the floor. It lands in a pool of muddy water and goes out. "Muriel was adamant."

I realize with a start that she is referring to the *Directrice*. The very thought of calling her 'Muriel' makes me cringe.

"You're the only one she trusts."

"To do what?" I press the piston into the barrel to expel any air. "Fuck it up?"

"No," Tosh laughs. "To keep quiet."

I give the needle a quick tap. "You know what this is, right?"

"Morphine, I should hope."

"I mean the girl. You realize what's happened."

"Ruptured Ectopic Gestation." She waves at the heap of bloody rags. "I examined the discharge. Some decidua."

So that's what they call it. The jellied bits, the bony limb. The bloody bundle tossed on a rubbish-fire in the back lot. Decidua. Dead leaves. Nothing more.

Ruptured fallopian tube? No, Tosh is wrong. This is not an ectopic pregnancy. But a nurse should never contradict a doctor, especially an ill-trained war volunteer whose days are spent counting supply-stores and filing recapitulatory reports. I do not treat patients. I number and docket them. Four forms for every patient admitted. Six more if discharged alive. Seventeen for a death. At this I excel.

I step towards the girl, needle poised. Her narrow face pokes out from the drawsheet. She is moaning. Mouth full and round, lips plump as a grape. Holding the syringe aloft, I kneel down and ask her name.

"Estelle."

This will ease the pain, I say. You will feel a swift prick, then relief. But first you must tell me what has happened. Her lace collar, visible above the drawsheet, is askew. I reach out to adjust it and she flinches.

"Carry on," snaps Tosh. "She's lost a lot of blood."

The girl is staring up at the needle, eyes wide with longing. Not yet, I tell her. First she must confess. Admit what she has done. It will be our little secret, I say. But we must know, *la doctoresse et moi*. We must know how you injured yourself.

The girl turns her face to the wall. Eerie shadows gloom over the chalky white. Her pulse is thready, cheeks pale. I put my lips to her ear and tell her what I think: the missed menses, the exhaustion and the nausea, a tiny ghost tad-poling its way to life inside. Her attempt at eviction. That way she need not speak the words. Only offer her assent, which she does. A quick nod. Eyes damp with unshed tears.

I swab and stretch a patch of skin, slip the needle in and press. Firm and smooth. You can see it start to work. Muscles in the face soften, eyes turn glassy. I move fast. Withdraw the hypodermic, hold a bowl up close, in case she vomits.

"What is it?" Tosh asks, snapping on her gloves.

I turn and tell her.

We emerge at daybreak. Beyond the arched windows the sky is growing pale. In the refectory I shovel down forkfuls of eggs, sausage, potatoes. Buttered toast, more eggs. I drink a cup of black coffee in three swift gulps. Still, I feel sapped, empty. As if nothing can replenish me.

While I eat Tosh smokes and talks. Fond reminiscences about her time in Philadelphia. Idyllic afternoons spent in Fairmount Park. A grove of Elm trees by the river that used to remind her of Devonshire. Recollections that seamlessly give way affectionates about 'Nurse' the woman who cared for her when she was young, scolding her so often for making up stories that her younger brother took to chasing after his sister crying "Tosh, Tosh! Wait for me, Tosh Tosh." And at the memory of this, she throws back her head and laughs. Her vigor astounds me after the night we have passed.

The girl is alive. Asleep in an old cloakroom beside the office, which now holds a hospital bed. As the anesthetic wore off, she talked. It happens a lot. Sometimes these ether-fringed ramblings make no sense. Other times you can piece things together. *Madame* told Estelle that a baby was not possible. The refugee charity would not pay a larger subsidy for it. And what good is an *estaminet* with a baby crying behind the bar? So when *Madame* left her knitting in the parlor, Estelle saw her chance. She pinched a needle and carried it off to her room under the eaves, along with a pile of bar towels. She was prepared for the blood, but not the pain.

It could have been worse. We managed to stanch the bleeding. She did not go into shock. Her uterine wall was intact, though her cervix is badly lacerated. She must have used a mirror, Tosh guessed, something (or someone) to show her how to aim the needle, where to poke and thrust. She was not just stabbing away blindly. If she'd done that, Tosh said, she'd be dead.

She still might die. She lost a lot of blood and the risk of septicemia remains high. Madame's nine-inch needle was not, after all, sterile. But for now, she lives. Asleep in her makeshift bedroom by the office, for the *Directrice* refused to have her in the post-op ward partitioned from the men by a screen. How she plans to keep this a secret I shall never know. But she seems determined. Tosh and I are under strict orders to

reveal nothing. Threatened with dismissal should we breathe a word.

The refectory is filling up. Nurses, doctors, and orderlies shuffle into the high ceilinged room, carrying with them the smell of the wards. Bedpans, soiled bandages, idioform, paraffin smoke, and pus. The fat *Gestionnaire* emerges from the kitchen to announce there is no fresh milk. *Sucre?* asks Tosh. *Non. Pas de tout.* Sugar stopped last week and will not resume. We are foolish, his tone makes clear, to even hope for sugar. The news makes Tosh sullen, which may seem spoilt, but we rely on small indulgences to see us through. For Tosh it is a proper cup; for the *Directrice* an elegant coiffure. And for me it is the sable cloak Louis gave me for my fiftieth birthday. After a day spent struggling with thin ink and faulty nibs, I can throw it over my shoulders, step outdoors, and feel revived.

I finish the dregs of my coffee and push the cup aside.

"Come," says Tosh. "A bit of air."

I shake my head. My back aches, my eyes feel dry. Sleep is what I crave. Nothing but sleep.

"That was quite a tuck in," Tosh gestures at my empty plate. "Best have a stroll." Then she slides her arm through mine and moments later we are slipping out the door out and walking down the pebbled drive. The cold chafes my hands, raw from harsh soap and scalding water. I ball them into fists to keep warm. Rubbing them together hurts too much.

"Rather brave of you to leave that hanging by the front-door." Tosh fingers the hem of my cloak. "Aren't you afraid someone's going to nick it?"

I shrug.

Her eyes flash with amusement, voice dropping to a lower register. "Yes, quite. One ought to look one's best for the war, don't you think, dah-ling?"

Tosh has a flair for the dramatic. She does voices, accents. This one is Lady Penelope. A tippler of sherry and avid bridge-player who complains constantly about her husband, Lord Marchmont. She is based, I suspect, on Tosh's own mother, although Tosh does not say so and I would never ask.

Tosh pulls a crumpled pack of Gitanes from her greatcoat pocket while Lady Penelope banters on. "You will have one, won't you, dah-ling? No? Not even a small puff? Quite right. I never smoke. Dreadfully unattractive in a woman. All those blue-stockinged females do is loiter about Westminster waving cigarettes in people's faces. What a frightful bunch they are, sporting trousers and demanding the vote. Appalling." She gives three exaggerated blinks, cigarette poised before her lips.

I offer a wan smile.

"That's better."

We draw to a halt beside the huge stone fountain, dry but for a stagnant pool of rainwater. Tosh stares down at the murky soup of fag-ends and dead leaves and exhales a cool ribbon of smoke. In the silence that follows my mistake becomes clear. Out here, far from any eavesdroppers, I can be questioned. Probed for details about how a lowly office clerk comes to recognize an abortion gone awry. I cast about for an excuse, some reason to go back alone. But Tosh is too quick.

"A surgical school is being established five miles from the front," she says. "It will give doctors just out of medical school crucial training before sending them to field hospitals and aid posts. I have been pressing this venture for some time and only yesterday received word that it has been approved. As you might imagine, resources are slim."

"A shoestring budget."

"Sorry?"

"It's an American expression."

Tosh nods, fingers worrying a frayed belt-loop. Her hands are never idle. "I can request two staff and would like to put your name in for a transfer."

"Me?"

A smile flits across her face. "Why not?"

"Because there are plenty of professional nurses who are far more skilled."

"Most nurses serving in field hospitals and aid-posts are volunteers. I see little sense in training doctors for conditions that do not exist."

"You want me because I'm inept."

"No. I want you because you speak French and because you are good at sums. This venture will be supported by contributions from overseas. I require someone who can calculate expenses, secure supplies, convert donations to French currency, and manage tricky negotiations with local authorities." Tosh runs her free hand through her hair and waits. Smoke curling up from her cigarette. Propping her foot on the lip of the fountain, she regards me through a bluish haze. My hesitation surprises her. She expected me to leap at the chance.

"It's a splendid opportunity"

I shrug. My duties here are not over-taxing. Every month I travel to Paris to have the accounts audited and meet with the committee. The *Directrice* grants nearly all my leave requests and the *patron* at the *table d'hôte* in the village never fails to give me a table by the fire. No need to risk present comfort in an uncertain gamble for the future. A lesson I learnt long ago.

"Do you know how few nurses are authorized to work so close to the front?" Her voice rasps with irritation. "Most women would be thrilled at such an opportunity."

"I'm not most women."

She looks at me askance, weighing her options. Then she stubs her fag-end against the sole of her boot and tucks it into her pocket. Buttoning the soiled flap of her greatcoat, she regards me with cool nonchalance. Brown eyes keen and sharp. "If you do not want to serve near the front, where proper medical care is most crucial, then why are you here?"

All my life people have asked this question. Arizona, New Orleans, France. Why are you here, Vera Palmer? Why? As if my very presence on the planet were incongruous. A curious mistake. I stare at Tosh long and hard. The wild mane of curls. Her young, insouciant face. After the strain of last night, it is too much to bear. "Why am I here? I am here for reasons you would thoroughly disapprove of. I am here because eighteen years ago a man asked me to come to France. So I did. You see, Tosh, I am not like you. I am a weak, unenlightened woman. An old-fashioned ninny who knows no better than to stumble blindly after a man and then marry him."

"You're married?"

"Was. Until he died. Three weeks before the war began. I married him after he became ill..." I shake my head, knowing how it will sound to the likes of Tosh.

"Go on."

"Louis was a Frenchman of the old school. We disagreed on many things. Things that did not matter back in New Orleans, but which came to matter very much once I joined him over here."

Head tipped to one side, Tosh levels me with a penetrating stare. As if I might be someone she never suspected. The possibility intrigues her. I can hear myself blundering on. "Towards the end of his life, Louis's faith became increasingly important to him. He wanted very much to marry. It made him happy to formalize our relations in this way, before a priest. . . the request of a dying man."

For a long moment Tosh says nothing. When at last she speaks, her voice is warmed by a tenderness I have never sensed in her before. "You needn't apologize for marrying a man you loved. And on his deathbed. It all sounds rather romantic."

"I assure you, it was not."

"That explains your file. When I was hunting down your contract, there was nothing under 'Palmer'."

"Dumont. Officially, I am Vera Dumont."

"Yet you go by Nurse Palmer..." She gives me a sly wink. "Old fashioned? Unenlightened?"

I look away, unable to hide my irritation. My decision was purely practical. If someone were to shout 'Nurse Dumont' across the ward, I would never respond. Conservatism alone drove this choice. A desire for something—just one bloody thing—to remain the same.

“So. Am I being transferred?”

Tosh throws up her hands. “I am trying to discover your preference! Just tell me what you want.”

What I want...

What do I want? To smell the desert after rain, to awake each morning beneath a soft Cheyenne blanket, skin heavy with his scent. To rip out the flawed cog inside of me that brought it all to a screeching halt, then wind back through the years and do everything all over again. Yes. That is what I want.

I want a different ending.